

Chapter 5

Laliv Clenman, “Texts and violence in modern Israel: interpreting Pinchas”

Introduction

This is a discussion guide for Laliv Clenman’s chapter in Julia Snyder and Daniel H. Weiss (eds.) (2021). *Scripture and Violence*. London: Routledge.

Summary of Chapter

Clenman’s chapter discusses a 2015 incident in which a man named Yishai Schlissel stabbed and killed 16-year-old Shira Banki and injured six others who were participating in the annual Pride Parade in Jerusalem. An anonymous poster put up in Jerusalem after the attack lauded the killing, using quotes from Numbers 25 in the Hebrew Bible and equating the attacker with Pinchas (Phineas), who kills two people in the biblical story. Clenman compares the poster’s cursory appeals to scripture with traditional rabbinic interpretations of the Pinchas narrative, and argues that in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, the attitude toward Pinchas’ violent action is much more ambivalent and nuanced, and he is not necessarily or straightforwardly held up as a model to emulate. She argues that the poster’s use of scripture and its positive valuation of zealot violence are out of keeping with normative rabbinic Jewish tradition.

Understanding the Argument

As you read Clenman’s chapter, answer the following questions. These questions are designed to help you understand her argument.

1. Clenman analyzes a poster that was put up in Jerusalem after the 2015 Pride Parade. According to Clenman, how is scripture from the Hebrew Bible used in the poster?
2. Clenman argues that the discussion of Numbers 25 in the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds “discourages rather than encourages such violent acts” (p. 61). What aspects of the Talmudic texts does Clenman see as discouraging people from emulating the violent act of Pinchas?
3. According to Clenman, is there evidence that Schlissel himself was motivated to act violently because of Numbers 25? What does he say about his motivations in his letter?

Digging Deeper

After discussing questions 1-3 above, take time to reflect on the following issues:

4. Were you surprised to learn that religious people – e.g., the rabbis of the Talmud – do not always understand characters in scriptural narratives as models to be imitated today? Does this knowledge affect your view of violent scriptural stories, and if so, how?
5. The makers of the poster used the story of Pinchas to glorify Schlissel's violent actions. Do you find this appeal to scripture to glorify violence problematic? Why or why not?
6. Would it make sense to view Schlissel's actions at the Pride Parade as "caused by rabbinic Judaism"? Why or why not?

Suggestions for Further Reading

- To learn more about Jewish views on sexuality, see, e.g.:
 - o Steven Greenberg (2004). *Wrestling with God and Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
 - o Rabbi Chaim Rapoport (2004). *Judaism and Homosexuality: An Authentic Orthodox View*. London: Vallentine Mitchell.
- For more on violence in the Jewish tradition, see, e.g.:
 - o Elliott S. Horowitz (2006). *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.